



# Senate Policy Committees

**R. Eric Petersen**

Analyst in American National Government

January 26, 2009

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

[www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)

RL32015

**CRS Report for Congress**

*Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress*

## Summary

This report discusses the history of the two Senate policy committees and explains their structure, operation, and functions.

Created in 1947, the Senate Republican and Democratic Policy Committees are party leadership structures. Each is an analytical arm of its respective party leadership. Their fundamental missions are to achieve policy integration and to promote party unity through the dissemination of information about policy and other Senate matters.

The two policy committees are different in structure and operation, a contrast that appears to be rooted in different leadership styles within the two party organizations. Republican leadership has traditionally been shared among Senators other than the party floor leader; customarily, the Democratic leadership positions of party floor leader, chair of the Democratic Policy Committee (DPC), and chair of the Democratic Conference have been posts held by the same person. Additionally, where both policy committees once functioned largely as service agencies, peripheral to party leadership, today, the two party entities have assumed roles more important to the overall leadership structure in the Senate. The style and activities of the Republican Policy Committee (RPC) and DPC have, over the years, been shaped largely by the party leaders, particularly when the party is in the opposition.

This report will be updated if there is a change in the leadership of either party's policy committee.

## **Contents**

Democratic Policy Committee ..... 2  
Republican Policy Committee..... 5

## **Tables**

Table 1. Democratic Policy Committee Chairs ..... 3  
Table 2. Republican Policy Committee Chairs..... 5

## **Contacts**

Author Contact Information ..... 7

The Senate created Republican and Democratic Policy Committees when it inserted a provision within a supplemental appropriations bill, which Congress passed in 1947. This act provided for the maintenance of a staff for majority and minority policy committees in that chamber. As such, the policy committees have a statutory basis, with staff financed by the legislative branch, different from other party organizations, such as the campaign committees. The proposal for creating the policy committees came about during the reform hearings conducted by the LaFollete-Monroney Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress (1946). In its final report (1946), the Joint Committee recommended that the House and Senate establish policy committees for each party, consisting of seven members. The panels were to be separate from either of the party's respective conferences, and have staff support paid through legislative branch funds.<sup>1</sup> These entities were modeled after the 19<sup>th</sup> century party Steering Committees, which leaders employed to achieve an orderly method of scheduling floor actions.<sup>2</sup>

In their formative years, the two policy committees functioned as service agencies that prepared material on issues and legislation for party members. Both entities were peripheral to party leadership. How active they were was shaped largely by the "preferences and expectations of party leaders,"<sup>3</sup> as well as on whether their party was in the minority or in the majority.<sup>4</sup> Early meetings were rarely publicized within the chamber, and were held with only policy committee members and senior staff present. Formal votes were infrequently taken, and minutes were short and private.<sup>5</sup> The Republican Policy Committee (RPC) provided all Republican Senators with a resume of meeting discussions and the chair would customarily hold press conferences after meetings. By contrast, communication on what was discussed in the Democratic Policy Committee (DPC) was done informally, through "word of mouth" between individual Democratic Senators.<sup>6</sup> Both policy committees of the Senate relied on such early meetings to discuss and generate ideas about policy matters.

In current practice, the Republican and Democratic Policy Committees differ in structure and operation. The contrast appears to be rooted in the hierarchy of leadership within the two party organizations, which continues to influence the composition of the policy committees. Customarily, the Democratic leadership positions of party floor leader, chair of the DPC, and chair of the Democratic Conference have been posts held by the same person. Republican leadership has traditionally been shared among Senators other than the party leader,<sup>7</sup> with the chair of the RPC elected by the Republican Conference.<sup>8</sup> Despite the differences in organization,

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, *The Organization of Congress: Suggestions for Strengthening Congress*, joint committee print, 79<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., June 1946 (Washington: GPO, 1946), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *A History of the United States Senate Republican Policy Committee, 1947-1997*, prepared by Donald A. Ritchie (Washington: GPO, 1997) [hereafter, Ritchie, *A History of the United States Senate Republican Policy Committee, 1947-1997*]; and Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to Congress*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 1 (Washington: CQ Press, 2000), p. 466.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel C. Patterson, "Party Committees," in Donald C. Bacon, Roger H. Davidson, and Morton Keller, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the United States Congress* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 1525.

<sup>4</sup> Ritchie, *A History of the United States Senate Republican Policy Committee, 1947-1997*, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm E. Jewell, *Senatorial Politics & Foreign Policy* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962), p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh A. Bone, "An Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 50, no. 2 (June 1956), p. 339.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *The Senate 1789-1989: Addresses on the History of the United States*, by Robert C. Byrd, 2 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1988), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> Since July 1995, the Republican Conference limits committee chairs, including the policy committee chair, to three two-year terms.

the two policy committees appear generally to have become more active in developing and promoting party unity along with assisting the floor leaders and committee chairmen (or ranking minority member) in designing, developing, and executing policy ideas within the Senate. Over time, these roles have become more important to the overall leadership structure in the Senate.<sup>9</sup>

## Democratic Policy Committee

When the DPC was established in 1947, the Democratic Conference adopted a resolution authorizing the chair of the conference to appoint the membership of the party's policy committee, and the Conference chair to appoint the chair of the policy committee.<sup>10</sup> The conference also declared that the committee would consist of seven members with the whip and the secretary of the conference attending meetings in an advisory capacity.<sup>11</sup> The first committee chair, Senator Alben W. Barkley of Kentucky, selected six relatively junior members on the basis of geography, purposefully omitting other leadership positions, such as the President pro tempore and committee chairs. These junior Senators were also chosen because they would be "easier for him to work with."<sup>12</sup> It has been reported that Senator Barkley very rarely convened the committee.<sup>13</sup>

The method of Senator Barkley's selection as chair of the DPC informed subsequent leadership decisions. At the beginning of each succeeding Congress, the Democratic leader named members to the policy committee, in addition to himself as chairman. Membership of the policy committee remained virtually the same, with the Democratic leader filling vacancies occasioned by the death, retirement, or defeat of committee members.<sup>14</sup> Members therefore generally served on the committee throughout their service in the Senate.

DPC leaders after Senator Barkley utilized the policy committee somewhat more frequently, but not as consistently as their Republican counterparts. One observer noted that the DPC "lacked the formality and institutionalization" that characterized the RPC.<sup>15</sup> For example, Senator Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, who chaired the panel in 1953-1961, started in 1959 the practice of having the members of the Legislative Review or Calendar Committee meet with the policy committee and take part in its deliberations.<sup>16</sup> Senator Johnson was also the first Democratic leader to use the DPC for getting Democratic Senators to support the party position and to develop alternatives intended to highlight differences between Democratic-backed and Republican-backed policy

---

<sup>9</sup> Sean Q. Kelly, "Democratic Leadership in the Modern Senate: The Emerging Roles of the Democratic Policy Committee," *Congress & the Presidency*, vol. 22, no. 2 (autumn 1995), p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, edited by Donald A. Ritchie (Washington: GPO, 1999), p. 389.

<sup>11</sup> *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, see *Conference notes from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress (1951-1952)*, p. 474.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph K. Huitt, "Democratic Party Leadership in the Senate," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 55, no. 2 (June 1961), p. 342; and *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, p. 341. See also Legislative Reference Service, *The Senate Democratic Steering Committee and the Senate*, by George Galloway.

<sup>13</sup> Bone, "Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," p. 342.

<sup>14</sup> *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, p. 541.

<sup>15</sup> Jewell, *Senatorial Politics & Foreign Policy*, p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> The Legislative Review Committee was an arm of the DPC composed of three freshmen Democratic Senators who handled calls of the Senate Calendar for the Democratic majority. See *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, p. 542.

proposals.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, who chaired the DPC in 1977-1989, chose not to convene the policy committee.<sup>18</sup>

When Senator George Mitchell of Maine became majority leader and chair of the Democratic Conference and the DPC in 1989, he appointed Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota to serve as co-chair of the policy panel. The two leaders established a more central role for the DPC in promoting the Democratic message inside the Senate and in public.<sup>19</sup> When Senator Daschle became majority leader in 1995, he chose to maintain the co-chair arrangement. In what appears to be a voluntary diffusion of leadership, in 1999, the co-chair was abandoned and a single chair of the policy committee was designated by the Democratic leader. Currently, the DPC consists of the chair, three regional chairs, and 16 additional members. It appears that the party leader continues to have the discretion of appointing such members. **Table 1** lists the chairs and co-chairs of the DPC.

**Table 1. Democratic Policy Committee Chairs**

Chair	Year
Alben W. Barkley (KY)	1947-1949
Scott W. Lucas (IL)	1949-1951
Ernest W. McFarland (AZ)	1951-1953
Lyndon B. Johnson (TX)	1953-1961
Michael J. Mansfield (MT)	1961-1977
Robert C. Byrd (WV)	1977-1989
George J. Mitchell (ME)	1989-1995
co-chair: Thomas Daschle (SD)	1989-1995
Thomas Daschle (SD)	1995-1999
co-chair: Harry Reid (NV)	1995-1999
Byron Dorgan (ND)	1999-present

**Sources:** U.S. Congress, Senate, *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, edited by Donald A. Ritchie (Washington: GPO, 1999); U.S. Senate Historical Office [http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Policy\\_Committee\\_Chair.htm#3](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Policy_Committee_Chair.htm#3); U.S. Senate Democratic Policy Committee <http://democrats.senate.gov/leadership/>.

Because the floor leadership and policy committee chairmanship were held by the same person for so long, the staff of the Democratic leader served also as the staff for the DPC. Relatively little staff work was performed on behalf of Democratic Senators, but rather was done for the

<sup>17</sup> Bone, "Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," p. 352. See also Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), pp. 507-514. Upon his election to the Vice Presidency in 1960, Johnson sought to retain the chair of the DPC. Democratic Senators unanimously decided to give the conference itself the right to confirm or challenge nominations by the new Democratic leader, Mike Mansfield of Montana, to the policy committee. See Tom Wicker, "Senate Democrats End Johnson Policy On Committee Posts," *New York Times*, January 5, 1961; and Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate*, chap. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Donald C. Baumer, "Senate Democratic Leadership in the 101<sup>st</sup> Congress," in Allen D. Hertzke and Ronald M. Peters, Jr., eds., *The Atomistic Congress: An Interpretation of Congressional Change* (Armonk: ME Sharpe, Inc., 1992), p. 299.

<sup>19</sup> Kelly, "Democratic Leadership in the Modern Senate," p. 120.

chair. The work included preparing legislative status reports, compiling quorum records, and noting the presence and absence from roll calls and votes.<sup>20</sup> Under Senator Byrd, the DPC staff negotiated for the Democratic leader with committee chairs and other Senators on substantive and procedural matters. Staff produced some publications, but oriented most of their efforts toward “personalized service to the leader rather than provision of service to all Democratic members.”<sup>21</sup>

Today, the DPC staff remains, in effect, the staff of the Democratic Conference, but works with all Senate Democrats. DPC staff are generally more specialized compared to the past, with most policy analysts holding advanced degrees in policy, law, or business. Several staff members specifically track legislation by broad jurisdictional areas—such as trade, governmental affairs, welfare and education, economy and small business, and foreign relations—and disseminate information about matters to all Democratic member offices.<sup>22</sup>

Broadly, the DPC plays a role in facilitating consensus within the Democratic party, by distributing information to Democratic Senate offices, and building public support for the party’s legislative agenda. DPC briefings, lunches, and strategy meetings for all Democratic Senators and some staff, and have been used for an assortment of activities. These include, but are not necessarily limited to providing guidance on drafting speeches, press releases, newsletters to constituents, and radio and television advertisements relevant to specific legislation, preparing reports for all Senate Democrats on the party record and performance, and sponsoring annual policy conferences intended to educate members on specific policy issues. These forums are used by Senate Democrats to reach a common understanding regarding the party’s legislative initiatives.<sup>23</sup>

When the Senate is in session the DPC distributes a variety of materials and publications for Senate Democrats.<sup>24</sup> Most are for internal distribution, although some are available to both the public and all Senate offices electronically at the committee’s website <http://democrats.senate.gov/>. Among the more commonly used examples are as follows:

- *Legislative Bulletins* summarize major provisions of legislation under consideration, supply pertinent information about amendments that might be offered, and frequently present pro and con arguments relating to the pending legislation. These bulletins are designed to educate members and staffers about a policy issue.
- *DPC Daily Report* summarizes the previous day’s action as well as anticipate future action, including pending legislation, timing of votes to be held, along with the nature and content of any unanimous consent agreements. These reports help Democratic Senators plan their schedules.
- *Issue Alerts* briefly describe policy changes that Democratic Senators may be asked about by the media.

Within the DPC are sub-units that engage in specialized services. These include

<sup>20</sup> Bone, “Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees,” p. 348.

<sup>21</sup> Donald C. Baumer, “Senate Democratic Leadership in the 101<sup>st</sup> Congress,” pp. 327-328.

<sup>22</sup> Sean Q. Kelly, “Democratic Leadership in the Modern Senate,” pp. 120, 125.

<sup>23</sup> Kelly, “Democratic Leadership in the Modern Senate,” pp. 113, 122- 124.

<sup>24</sup> Based on Sean Q. Kelly’s observation of the DPC, and his interviews with Senate leaders and staff.

- *Vote Information Office* provides a broad range services on vote-related matters, such as daily voting record sheets for each floor vote, summaries of individual Senator’s voting activity, and a series of annual documents reporting the previous year’s voting activities.

*DPC Graphics/Publications Office* supports individual Democratic Members with a range of printed material, such as the design and production of graphs and charts for use on the floor and at press conferences.

## Republican Policy Committee

When the RPC was created in 1947, it replaced the Republican Steering Committee with very few changes. Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, chair of the steering committee, became chair of the new policy committee, a position he held until becoming majority floor leader in 1953. Senator Taft’s decision not to hold both positions prompted the Republican Conference to elect a new policy chair, Senator William Knowland of California. Later in that year, Senator Knowland was elected majority leader following the death of Senator Taft, and relinquished his chairmanship of the policy committee.<sup>25</sup> **Table 2** lists the chairs of the RPC.

**Table 2. Republican Policy Committee Chairs**

Chair	Year
Robert A. Taft (OH)	1947-1952
William F. Knowland (CA)	1953
Homer Ferguson (MI)	1954
H. Styles Bridges (NH)	1955-1961
Bourke B. Hickenlooper (IA)	1961-1968
Gordon Allott (CO)	1969-1973
John Tower (TX)	1973-1985
William Armstrong (CO)	1985-1991
Don Nickles (OK)	1991-1996
Larry Craig (ID)	1996-2003
Jon Kyl (AZ)	2003-2007
Kay Bailey Hutchison (TX)	2007-2009
John Ensign (NV)	2009-Present

**Sources:** U.S. Congress, Senate, *A History of the United States Senate Republican Policy Committee, 1947-1997*, prepared by Donald A. Ritchie (Washington: GPO, 1997; U.S. Senate Historical Office [http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Policy\\_Committee\\_Chair.htm](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Policy_Committee_Chair.htm); U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee <http://www.senate.gov/~rpc/>).

<sup>25</sup> Bone, “An Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees,” p. 342.

The RPC has undergone considerable change both in size and complexion since its inception; changing functions at various times have led to expansion as well as contraction of membership.<sup>26</sup> There were nine Republican Senators on the policy committee when it first met in the 80<sup>th</sup> Congress (1947-1948), with membership consisting of appointments by virtue of office or official position within the party. These included the chair and secretary of the Republican Conference, the Republican floor leader, whip, policy committee chair, and four additional Senators nominated by the chair of the Republican Conference and ratified by the Conference. This membership structure remained consistent for the next six years. At the start of the 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress (1953-1954), the membership of the committee was expanded to include two-thirds of the standing committee chairmen. In the 84<sup>th</sup> Congress (1955-1956), the policy committee was expanded again to obtain better regional representation on the party panel, a balance between large and small states, and all Republicans facing reelection who were made members to give them added prestige.<sup>27</sup> By 1957, the policy committee was reduced to 14 members, with eight serving in an ex-officio capacity, and six elected by the Republican Conference.<sup>28</sup>

Today, the RPC is composed of the Republican Senate floor leader, whip, President pro tempore of the Senate (if a Republican), chair of the policy committee (who is elected in the Republican Conference), and chairs of the Senate's standing committees (if in the majority). In addition, the RPC has its own staff structure separate from the Republican Conference, which includes a staff director, secretary, and professional staff.

When the Republican party is in the minority in the Senate, its policy committee has greater independence and more opportunity to set the Senate Republican legislative agenda. It may also develop party policy in opposition to the majority, provide summaries of Republican positions on specific issues, research procedural and substantive issues and strategies, and draft policy alternatives. In the majority, or when a Republican is President, the RPC tends to function as a party "think tank" as well as in a liaison capacity to bridge differences with the Administration. In this capacity, the RPC maintains a research service that provides analytic reports for Republican Senators.

The principal function of the RPC in recent years has been to provide an educational forum for Republican Senators. It also participates in the orientation programs for new Republican Senators and their aides. Weekly luncheon meetings are held, usually every Tuesday when the Senate is in session. Here all Republican Senators are invited to review the Senate's schedule, to discuss policy options, and survey partisan strategies. Committee staff directors and legislative directors for individual Senators meet once a week in the policy committee office with RPC staff to review pending legislative issues and discuss strategy.

Policy committee staff perform a multitude of functions. They analyze the legislative record of Senators, review legislative histories, draft bills, and produce a host of publications. Important examples—that are distributed—include the following:

- *Policy papers* provide in-depth analysis of current policy issues and layout legislative options.

---

<sup>26</sup> Jewell, *Senatorial Politics & Foreign Policy*, p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Bone, "An Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," p. 342.

<sup>28</sup> Ritchie, *A History of the United States Senate Republican Policy Committee, 1947-1997*, p. 60.

- *Record Vote Analysis* indicates how members of each party voted on different legislative issues, provides a description of each vote and highlights of the debate, and summarizes pertinent bills in their final amended form.
- *RPC Monday Floorcast* is a one-page summary of anticipated floor business during the coming week, intended to give members a sense of the flow of Senate action in order to plan their schedules.
- *Legislative Notice* summarizes the major provisions of legislation under consideration, and provides information about possible amendments that might be offered. It often contains pros and cons relating to pending measures, and is meant to educate members and staff about policy issues.

The RPC also communicates the party's message and agenda. Its in-house, closed-circuit television station (RPC-TV) broadcasts to all Senate offices, and provides scheduling information and other messages from the leadership whenever the Senate is in session. The RPC also provides a telephone hotline available to Republican Senators calling on and off the Hill. It also maintains a public website, <http://www.senate.gov/~rpc>, which provides a current floor schedule and a summary of pending legislation.

## **Author Contact Information**

R. Eric Petersen  
Analyst in American National Government  
epetersen@crs.loc.gov, 7-0643